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NATURE

WILLIAM H. DAVIES

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NATURE

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By

William H. Davies

Published by B. T. Batsford, Ltd., London.

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"One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the ages can."

I

IT takes more than a short holiday to get a real love of Nature; such a love as makes trees like human companions, and green the colour we look for everywhere we go. A man who has sought human friends and been disappointed in them one by one, would do well to spend more hours in the fields and woods. For under those conditions he would begin to cultivate his own thoughts, and he would find those thoughts sweeter companions than any to be found in human societies—thoughts as pure and simple as the large eyes of cows, into which he looks, and as happy as the little

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birds that hop or sing around him. When he has led this kind of life for a time, he begins to take a dislike to crowds; not so much perhaps for the senseless chatter that is continually going on, as for the way in which people try to outshine each other and draw attention to their own particular bodies and possessions. He begins to see that they are all forced plants, flaunting and large; and he looks in vain for the modest human violet that shrinks from the human gaze. In writing this book I have thought proper to put it in the form of autobiography, and not in the form of an impersonal essay, thinking that it would sound more real on that account. It is my own experience and, although I am now living in a small town, in a house surrounded by many others, and not in a lonely cottage in a green lane—yet, for all that, every word was written under the trees. Nature is still very close to me, and I have several tree settlements within ten minutes' walk from where I eat and sleep.

We will now settle down to the simple story, with a poem to begin it.

When I at night stand at my cottage door,
And all the village sleeps, and there is heard
No other sound than bats' wings, or one note
That unawares escapes a sleeping bird;

When I stand there in that deep, silent hour,
Thoughts far too great to shape and utter rise;
Then do I feel, could I maintain that mood,
I would ere long grow more than human wise.

I seem about to grasp the scheme of life,
To which the light of day had kept me blind;
One moment more—ah no, for then it seems
Imagination suffocates my mind.

For I can feel the weight of those great thoughts
Bring on a drowsiness; the silence deep
Wrap all my senses till they cannot move,
My mind is forced to seek relief in sleep.

After I had spent six years in America, improving my mind and body as a tramp, I came back to England with the intention of making a living by writing books; the only

kind of work that would be a pleasure, and which I thought Nature intended me for. But, as I have explained elsewhere, it took me seven years to publish my first book, during which time I either lived in the slums of London or tramped the hard, country road. However, the book was published at last, and Edward Thomas, to whom I had become known, and who gathered from my work something of my past life, very kindly invited me to take a small cottage in Egg Pie Lane, in the Weald of Kent, and to enjoy the peace and quiet of the country. This was a very fine offer, for my small income would easily keep me going, seeing that he was to be responsible for rent, fire and light. And, although he was to leave his own house, which was only two meadows off, on Lady Day, yet, for all that, he kept his promise for over twelve months, until I published my Autobiography. It was then that I warned him to stop, as I felt that I could look after myself from that time onwards.

Under these pleasant conditions, I was in the mind to give all my thoughts to Nature, which I did at the very beginning. There were to be no weeds, but all flowers ; and I would have ears for the grasshopper as well as the lark.

In my travels in America I had seen many a fine sight of prairie, pine forest and waterfall ; but they have made no deep impression on my mind, and I can hardly account for the reason of this. Seeing that my imagination refuses to work on them at the present day, when I am in a more settled state, I do not think it was because of my unsettled life. Most likely it was natural prejudice, that I did not belong to that country and could not become a loving part of it. My first disappointment in America came when I saw its robin. I always had an idea that robins were the same all the world over, but in America I saw a different bird altogether. It was as large as our thrush or blackbird, and the red on its breast was

not deep, rich or attractive, and I never once, as far as I can remember, heard its voice. How different from our own pretty little mite; so neat and compact, and his blood-red breast, and his voice which is perhaps the sweetest and clearest of all our birds. ❧ The only thing in that country which I remember well at the present time, was not any great waterfall, mountain or valley, but, strange to say, a little hollow behind a green bank, which I came across by pure accident. No doubt my eyes were the only eyes to see that sight, all through its summer season. I was travelling at the time, walking the railway, to the town of Sandusky, on my way into the State of Michigan. About midday I was pestered by a flea, which had taken safe lodgings, without fear of eviction, half-way between my two shoulder blades. My hands being powerless to reach it, and no tree or fence being by to rub my back against, I made up my mind to strip and either catch it or make it hop away into

space. With this intention I climbed a steep bank at the side of the track, so as to find some hollow where I would not be seen if a passenger train should come when I had my coat and shirt off. But when I reached the top of the bank, and saw what was before me, I forgot all about my errand and stood full of amaze. For I saw a hollow about the size of an ordinary farm-pond, and it was crammed full of different flowers, bees, butterflies, and humming-birds that sipped while still on the wing. It was like one big jewel of light, in which the dazzling hues like other birds were flitting about here and there. That was the one scene, of all the natural beauties of America, that I remember well at the present day, and which I am not likely to forget. And yet the season came and went and probably no other eyes beheld that fine sight. For it was far from a town, and only tramps walked the railway track, and very few of them, seeing that they mostly steal rides on the freight trains. And

although a tramp might be pestered by a flea, it was hardly likely he would decide to get rid of it in that one particular spot. Again, how few tramps would have had the delicacy to climb a steep bank for fear of being seen from a passenger train that might or might not come along at that moment! Moreover, several trains might pass one after the other, and of their scores of passengers not one could swear, in such swift travelling, that a man was sitting on a bank with his shirt on his knee. Let us now return to Egg Pie Lane.

When I went to live in that cottage it was early in the year; the hedges were bare, and there were no flowers in the fields or on the roadside banks. With the exception of the skylark, whose singing season never seems to fail, and who can command his ecstasy at a moment's notice—with the exception of its voice the birds were all silent. So that I had the whole year to look forward to, from the small green curls of Spring's childhood

to the heavy white locks of Winter, and I was all alone to enjoy it. My nearest neighbour was the farmer whose cottage I rented, and whose house was about a hundred yards down the lane. For a farmer, this man was of a superior kind; not only intelligent, but patient and kind to the dumb things in his charge. He was also full of humour, and believed animals had a sense of humour as well as human beings. I am quite sure of this, and it was only a day or two ago that I saw a good example. It was in a meadow where there were about a dozen cows and one donkey. The cows apparently did not like the donkey's company, for every time he went near they put their heads down to horn him, and, stepping forward, chased him away. When this happened the donkey would jump away to safety, and begin to graze quietly at a distance. But the cows no sooner turned their eyes and began pulling at the grass, than the donkey again approached them and put them to the same trouble. This happened

quite a number of times, till at last the cows lay down one by one, chewing the cud, and making a circle. When the donkey saw this he came forward and walked right into the middle of the circle and stood looking at his enemies. At last, seeing that they were too lazy to rise and drive him away, he lay down himself, and began to roll and kick in the grass. That all this was deliberate mischief and spite there cannot be the least doubt. The donkey saw that his company was not liked and, instead of going to another part of the meadow, which was a large one, was determined to make himself as objectionable as possible.

The farmer, being a man of this kind, and knowing that I had come here to write and study, was too thoughtful to waste my time in idle gossip. In fact, I have a suspicion that his chief reason for coming near me at all was to see that I was not dead, and that he would be at no expense and trouble in having a corpse removed and an inquest held

on his farm. For that reason, when he used to cry at the cottage door, "Good morning, how are you?" I knew that he, being a poor man that did not want extra expense, was really anxious about my health. So I not only answered him in a cheerful voice, but I also went to the door, to prove that I was not too weak to walk.

My great advantage in living at this cottage was that I had the privilege of going where I liked on the farm, which was sixty acres in size. And these acres were not all under cultivation, for there was not only a thicket quite large enough to tempt a fox to hide by day, but there was also a large deep pond in the corner of another meadow, which was well surrounded by bushes and trees. Under these circumstances, I could wander about all day and not meet one human being. In fact the pond was in a lonely place indeed, for even the farmer, the only man that had a right to go there, seldom did. It was so lonely that the moorhens and watervoles were

numerous;

numerous; and the kingfisher often came there and dived down from the boughs into the water. So, when the summer came, instead of leaving my cottage by the front door and going out on to the public road, instead of doing this I left by the back door and walked along the hedgerows on the farm, enjoying real solitude without the least fear of meeting my own kind.

It was on the first appearance of the primrose that my interest in Nature began to take a strong hold on me. When I saw those golden faces thick on the banks, I saw at once the great mistake poets had made, and are still making, when they call that flower pale and wan. Pale it may be, but what of its shining looks and its bravery in great clusters, which make it look the healthiest of all our wild flowers. What fine cheerful faces they have in the early spring, when they are to be seen everywhere; whereas daffodils may be sought for miles and not found.

When I had enjoyed the primrose for several days, I began to look with great eagerness for the first violet. For those two flowers usually come together in our minds ; and when we mention one we always think of the other, if we have an idea to mention a second flower. But it was some time before I was fortunate enough to find a violet, because of its being so small, and the grass overtopping it. Even when violets are on a bank and outgrow the grass, it is always necessary to draw close to see them, because blue is a nearer colour to grass than yellow is. For that reason the primroses show a long way off, but violets must be approached to be seen.

The way I found my first violet was very romantic. I had seen a bee going here and there, as though he were in search of something ; and, being interested to know what it was, I followed him for a little while, and then saw him settle down. When I got close enough to bend over the place where

he was, he rose and, angry at being disturbed, buzzed and made several swift flights around me, not knowing whether to attack me or not. However, he soon decided to leave me in possession of the place, and went off in quest of something else. When he had gone I looked to see what had drawn his attention, and then saw that it was a violet. It was my first violet of the year, but whether it was his or not I cannot say. I will now give you a song about finding my first violet.

Of primrose boys
  April has many;
He seems as fond
  Of them as any;
He shows the world
Those boys in gold.

But violets are
  His girls, whom he
Shuts up in some
  Green nunnery:
So does he prove
His deepest love.

April, a girl
  Of yours is found;
High walls of grass
  Hemmed her around:
April, forgive me—
I followed a bee.

℟ When a man gives his whole heart to Nature, and has no cares outside, it is surprising how observant he becomes, and how curious he is to know the cause of things. He sees ten thousand motionless leaves, there being no wind, and yet his eyes detect the shaking of one leaf in particular, where some kind of life must be. And he can see and is deeply interested in the trembling of one blade of grass, caused by some little insect making its way towards the light. At last his observation becomes so keen, through loving interest, that he not only notices how grass is made to look fresher after rain, which is apparent to everyone, but he can even detect a freshness in the birds' voices, which escapes the ordinary man. If he is indoors,

he can tell at once by the voices of the birds that there is a cat or stoat somewhere near. Their short, angry cries—and not one of them in full song—are sufficient proof of that. However, there is one bird whose voice has often deceived me, and I could never account for the great change in his spirit. Many a time have I been startled by his sobbing, and have come out of the cottage to see what troubled him. But what causes the robin to sob at certain times is still a mystery that I have not been able to understand. Every other bird has a certain song which he sings as long as he sings at all. For instance, the chaffinch has a loud laughing song which comes to a sudden stop. And the blackbird has a kind of chant of few notes but rich and strong. But when the robin changes from his sweet and cheerful song into that long, piercing sob, which I have heard so often, I have always felt troubled. The owl, of course, makes a wretched, forsaken cry, but we have very

little pity for him, for it is the only voice he has. But every time I hear the robin sob, I always get up, even in the middle of meals, to see if there is any cat near, or any human being standing or walking near his nest. However, I have seen nothing, and the bird, the singer of such sweet songs, has still stood on a bough and sobbed, distressed about something we know nothing of.

When the summer came for certain, and the air had a steady heat, I could hardly remain in the house for ten minutes at a time. In fact, I not only did all my writing out of doors, but I also had my meals there. I became so much a part of Nature that the birds used to mistake me for the stump of a tree. So quiet would I sit in the garden that they would often fly straight at me, not discovering their mistake until I made a sudden move of surprise, just as they were about to perch on my head or shoulder. It was very amusing to hear their little cries of fear, and to see the quick turns they made,

when they had come with such confidence to within a few inches of my face. On one occasion, when I was writing a long letter, a bee came and settled on the top of my pencil, and there he remained all through the time of composition, which was about half an hour, in spite of how I shook the pencil in the act of writing. Such a letter was bound to be sweet and cheerful, for who could write an ill-natured one under such conditions. I had always hated letter-writing, and always will, but that letter was a pleasure to write; and, so as the bee should enjoy his strange position as long as possible, I made it one of the longest letters I have ever written. I mention this incident to show that not only was I deeply interested in the life around me, but that these little lives were also interested in me, and in what belonged to me. In fact, I have often walked or sat for half an hour or more with a butterfly sleeping on my sleeve, or hanging from the collar of my coat. And I always

took great care that these little things, so confident and blind to danger, should have their pleasure out, and not be disturbed until they were ready to go of their own accord. I felt it a great pleasure to wait their convenience, for I knew that their lives would not be as safe in Nature's hands as in mine. Living under these conditions was pleasant indeed, after having spent so many years in the slums of a large city and travelling without any great interest on sea and land.

During these fine summer months I kept a free house, with the doors and windows wide open, for any little creature that might have the courage to enter. And it was surprising to see the number of bees that came in, with an occasional butterfly that settled on the painted flower on the wall-paper. But the most frequent visitors were robins and the farmer's fowls, which were in and out all through the day. These visits were owing to the floor being strewn with bread-crumbs, which had been scattered on purpose to

tempt

tempt them in. But the robins used to get into such desperate fights that I could step forward, without employing the least silence, and take them up in my hands, so as to part them. On these occasions, it was my custom to put one out through the front window and the other out through the back. However, they would soon return for the crumbs, and, seeing each other again, would begin fighting with as much fury as ever.

On one occasion a swallow came in by accident and tried to escape by beating itself against the glass. When I caught hold of the bird, to give it liberty, I was surprised to see how beautiful it was. It was the first time I had ever been close enough to see a swallow properly. But I did not hold it many seconds, for I knew well that a free, wild bird of that kind would die in the hand, however gentle the hand was, if kept too long.

But perhaps my strangest visitor was chanticleer. I say the strangest because he

was always in the house without my knowing it, and always left with a great noise. For when I was sitting in a deep study, facing the fire-grate out of habit, chanticleer would quietly and carefully enter the back door and, coming right into the front room, begin to pick up the crumbs behind my chair, which I had put there for the robins. He did all this so quietly that I could never tell he was there. But in a few moments he would stretch to his full height and, forgetting where he was and the great care he had taken to get there, would let forth such a lusty crow that I invariably leapt out of my chair with sudden fright. This violent movement of mine would bring him to himself, and he would half fly and half run for the open air, making a noise as though he were being plucked alive. The cause of all this commotion was that when he was enjoying the crumbs of bread he heard himself challenged by chanticleer on the next farm, and of course he had to answer, no matter where he was.

Every time this happened I always had a good laugh after it was over.

The way I discovered this bird's death—he was called Old Tom—will prove how keen my observation was at that time. I had noticed right at the beginning that he never once let a challenge go unanswered. So one morning, when I heard his enemy give a lusty crow, I listened for Old Tom's answer. But to my surprise, the other bird crowed several times, each time fiercer and longer, and still all was silent on our farm. Having a suspicion that something was wrong, I went out and made my way towards the barn, which was not many yards off. In a few moments I discovered poor Old Tom lying on his side and dead. Of course I expected to find that he was either dead or had been sold and taken away, for I knew that nothing in life would have interested him so much that he would have been indifferent to his enemy's challenge. He was a fine, noble fellow, and always called the hens when he

found anything to eat, and hardly swallowed a grain or crumb before they came to have their share. But I soon noticed how selfish his successor was, a young bird which the farmer got to take Old Tom's place.

Another visitor was the farmer's dog, a large sheep-dog that came in leaping through the window. This dog had an extraordinary appetite, for when I threw him a large slice of bread he licked it up like a postage stamp. When he had done this with about three slices, and I began to see that it was hopeless to attempt to satisfy him, I would leave the house as a sign that there was no more, and he must follow me. But before the dog would do so, he was mean enough to go all over the floor, licking up the tiny crumbs of bread that were strewn for the robins.

One night he broke loose and came to my door, whining to be let in. It was the most pathetic whine I had ever heard, like a dying child crying, and it was impossible to allow him to continue in that strain. So I

got out of bed and opened the door for him. After placing some food before him I went to bed again, thinking that he, after being well fed, would sleep there till morning. But this dog was such a good watch-dog that he could not stay there shut up for the night, in spite of comfort, and whined again, to be able to return to his cold crib at the side of his master's house.

The next morning the farmer had two stories to tell me. One was that Bob, the sheep-dog, had broken his chain in the night; and the other story was that Boxer, a large black horse that used to stand for hours at night, with his head across the garden gate, staring at the light in my window, had broken into the stable and eaten several pounds of cake. Of course this cake was not Madeira, Sultana or Seed-cake, such as we buy at confectioners' shops, but for all that it was too dear to allow a horse to have his entire fill on it, without being mixed with something more common. But, as I have

said, this farmer was kind and patient with his animals, and had a strong sense of humour; and for that reason he laughed, although the loss of so much cake was not a laughing matter to a poor man.

I remember one incident in particular, which showed his sense of humour. Bob, the dog, had no tail, only a very short, thick stump. But one morning, when he came to my cottage, I saw to my astonishment that he not only had a small tail, but was wagging it with apparent pleasure. Not having the least suspicion of the truth, I thought the dog had grown a tail in one night, although I had to confess that such a thing was wonderful. While I was standing there looking at the dog, who was still wagging his tail all the time, the farmer came up, and with a serious face, said: "How proud Bob is of his tail, as short as it is." "Yes," I answered—"and there was only a short stump there yesterday." When the farmer heard me say this he laughed so

heartily

heartily that I knew at once there was a trick somewhere. After a time he explained to me how he had shot a rabbit and, after cutting off its tail, had fastened a piece of it to Bob's stump, and the dog had been wagging it ever since.

One summer's day, when I was walking along the hedgerow, I saw a gold bug. I do not mean a fly that was yellow, or the colour of gold, but one that was really made in parts of that solid metal. When it tried to soar it came slowly to earth, because of its weight; and so it was quite plain that parts of its body were made of solid gold. I would have hardly thought this possible, had I not seen with my own eyes how its weight brought it down and made it incapable of a long flight.

On this same day I had another great surprise, for I saw what is perhaps the most uncanny and fascinating sight in all Nature. I saw the hawk for the first time, and I shall never forget how his presence held my eyes

as long as he was in the neighbourhood. When I saw that large dark bird motionless in the clear air, neither perched nor singing, my whole attention was drawn to him, and I could think of nothing else. It seemed to me that all the other parts of Nature were merely things at play, and all the deadly earnestness of life was concentrated in that silent and motionless bird, as he searched the green miles, at that great distance, for helpless young birds and mice. It was tragedy without mistake, in spite of the clear smiling skies and the green sprays that danced to the tune of singing birds. However, he did not remain long in the neighbourhood, for I suppose he saw nothing worth swooping for. After he had made a few short flights and come to a standstill as many times, he went off in a straight line towards the west, and was soon out of sight. Perhaps I was the only thing on the earth that had been conscious of his presence. For when he had gone I felt a great difference in myself, but

heard no extra happiness among the birds. So I judged they had not been conscious of the danger that had brooded there in such deadly earnestness.

Only once before in my life had I been fascinated by an object in the manner I have described; and that was when I was on the London Embankment and saw a man drowning in the Thames. He had jumped off Lambeth Bridge, and when I saw him first he had been carried some distance away from it, by his struggles and the tide. My first impression was that he was swimming, for his whole head and face were above the water. But in a few moments I saw him sink, for the first time. Then I saw him rise again; but this time he only rolled his head and half a face, and was sunk to the nose. I stood there in fearful expectation, and it was not long before his head bobbed up again. But this time I saw no sign of a face—only the black crown of his head. It was now that I became fascinated, for that

head floated there motionless, and would neither rise nor sink. When I saw this it was a torment to me, and I almost cursed that head because it would not sink. In the distance, I saw a boatman rowing towards it and, as though the evil spirit of that drowned man would play a ghastly joke, the head still kept motionless above the water, to make the boatman row his hardest, and then to disappoint him at last. For just when he was near enough to take in his oars, and was about to put out his hand to grasp that head, it disappeared like a heavy stone. It was the most tormenting experience I had ever had. While the man had life enough to struggle I could not realize what was taking place. But when I saw the head taking so long to sink, knowing that the man was surely drowned, I suffered a mental agony, that almost made me cry out and curse him. As long as there was the smallest part of him visible to the eye it was impossible to leave the spot and go about my business. I was so

taken with what I saw that I thought there was no other witness. But when it was all over, and the only life to be seen on the river was the boatman dragging the water with a grappling-hook, I could then see scores of people in different places, all of them looking in the same direction. This was the first time in my life that an object had fascinated me and held me in its strong spell; and the second time came when I saw the hawk motionless in the clear air, without support and silent.

In the hot summer evenings I never felt inclined to go to bed until I was certain that sleep would come almost immediately. So I used to sit outside, or stand at the cottage door, watching the stars and bats, and hearing the occasional note that came from a half-sleeping bird, or that escaped him in his dreams when he was more than half asleep. On these occasions the deep silence of night was so eloquent that I often thought the mystery of life was about to be revealed to me in all its parts.

℟ But there was one sound and one sight that always had a great charm for me at that late hour ; and that was the sound of a train, and its appearance at last in the distance. Owing to the darkness of night, the distant trees and hills could not be seen ; so that when a train came with all its cars alight, it looked like a comet low in the sky, near the earth but not touching it. A train had never been so romantic to me as at that time, and I am certain it will never be so romantic again. Before I could see it at all, its very sounds in the far distance made my ears open with pleasure. First I could hear it go, puff, puff : like a dog barking hoarsely, as it started from the distant town. Then its puffs became faster and faster, until I could only hear one long dull sound, like some strong thing that was cutting through the solid earth. The next sound would be a loud, violent shriek from its whistle, just before it entered a dark tunnel. And it was not long after this before it appeared in sight,

travelling slow, it seemed, but surely passing away.

These trains always seemed to me to be a part of Nature. It never occurred to me that they were things made to carry men to and fro, and were doing so every time they passed. And never once did my imagination dwell on men and women inside those trains, going home or abroad. I could no more think of that than I could think of inhabitants in Mars or the moon shining so quiet and clear above me.

He lived a hermit for a year,
His cottage had no other near;
And there his summer days would spend,
With only Nature for his friend;
He listened for no loved one's feet—
And yet his lonely life was sweet.
The smallest things had then the power
To claim his care from hour to hour;
A small wild blossom was so fair
It filled him with a miser's care,
When near his gold that miser stands
And laughs with both his lips and hands.

Ah, what a joy to sit at night
And see the lighted trains in sight;
To see those trains like lizards glide
Through trees upon the dark hill-side;
Or, ere one came in sight, to hear
That iron beast, as it drew near;
When barking hoarsely it would come
Faster and faster out of some
Far kennel-town; or into a tunnel
Dash, with smoke-clouds from its funnel;
Or when, upon a misty night,
It in the distance with its light,
Passed like a comet in that space
Where late the green hills had their place!

II

What joy to sit alone in solitude,
And have before my eyes the poets dead!
First on my shelf is Shakespeare, with his world
Of knights and ladies, shepherds, witches, clowns,
And fairies with their schemes to help all lovers;
The chief of that strong band of mighty men
Whose lips would never fail in golden speech
Till bowls of sack were held to silence them;
Nature's real king, to whom the power was given
To make an inkdrop scent the world for ever.

Next, Milton ; that blind bard who never laughs,
His mind so full of man's great destiny ;
Who, wrapt in darkness, sees the stars by day.
Next, Wordsworth like a homely bee doth sing,
And feed on simple flowers that give him joy.
Comes Byron next—that fierce, ill-tempered wasp
Who cannot softly suck, and bites with greed
The stronger tasting fruits of poesy.
Next on my shelf I see the ploughman bard,
Who sings so sweet while pitching hay or turf.
Now Shelley comes, and Keats, and Coleridge,
With their own world outside humanity.
Next, Blake ; artist and poet, great in each ;
Whose mind was like a double-yokèd egg,
Or like two separate kernels in one shell ;
Who runs across the green fields, laughing loud,
Pelted with flowers by merry Innocence.
Next, Herrick comes, who cocks his ears at once,
To hear a woman move her petticoat.
With these I live, and they destroy in me
The craving for real life, which ends in sorrow ;
For so it is—when real life feeds our minds,
It must be through the flesh, which is too weak
To bear the mind's increasing appetite.
But these sweet, silent books have wiser means
To give us pleasure—we are fed by them
Spirit to spirit, with the flesh controlled.

At this time I had very few books, only the few I have mentioned and a dictionary. Of course I had the greatest book of all—the Bible. This is hardly worth mentioning, for we take it for granted that no man would collect books without beginning with that one, which is not only the greatest, but is also the easiest to possess. But although I had looked forward to enjoying books in a quiet, country cottage, it was surprising how long it was before I began to read them. There were so many things out of doors to attract me, and I was continually making notes of what I saw. Sometimes I carried one of these books with me all day and never opened it. One day, when I opened a book, the white pages and the black print looked so cold, hard and ugly, that I closed it at once and let my eyes return to the warmer and softer beauties of Nature. I knew very well that the book contained pleasant thoughts, but my eyes refused to supply them to my mind, not liking the form of their delivery.

The fact of the matter was that my mind was teeming with its own fancies, which, like young children, were the happier for being by themselves, without being mixed with their elders—the greater fancies of other minds.

Now it must be remembered that when I was shut up inside this lonely cottage at nights, it was very quiet; so quiet that when a fly moved on the wall-paper, where the paper was loose, the sound was always loud enough to draw my attention. And the sound of the moths' wings beating against my pillow at night, was like the hammer blows of an arm that would murder me, aiming at my head and just missing it. No doubt these blows sounded the heavier for having my ear pressed against the pillow. In fact it is these little sounds that draw our attention, when living in solitude, and not the loud thunder-clap or torrent of rain. I remember one day sitting on the grass and suddenly hearing what I thought was a large animal just

behind me. But when I looked I saw nothing at all. In a few moments I heard the same sound and, taking notice of the place, made my way towards it and waited to hear it again. It was not long before I heard it for the third time, and then saw the shaking of a few dry leaves. On pushing two or three of these leaves aside, I saw a beetle, and it was this insect that had made all the noise, when I had expected to see a large, savage dog. It will be seen by this that my hearing was acute and always on the alert for small, mysterious sounds, which continually employed my eyes to find out their cause. One night, when I was lying down, I heard such a scratching near my head that I sat up immediately, thinking a large rat was in the act of breaking through the plaster. But when I looked I only saw a spider, though it was a large one. No doubt there was a hollow in the wall, and that is why he made such a great sound when moving about. However, this spider

interested

interested me at once, not so much on account of his size, but because of his two eyes, which were so large that he appeared to wear goggles. I was so interested to know where this strange creature was going that I made up my mind to keep awake until my curiosity was satisfied. So I sat up and watched, and then saw that he was making his way towards a web in the corner of the ceiling. But when I looked at that web, I saw that a spider was already in possession, and that this one was not going home. And in a few moments after this I saw that my large-eyed spider was not paying a friendly visit; for as soon as the other spider saw this one coming, he left home in haste and ran away for his life. When the large-eyed spider saw the other go like that, he stood still for a long time, as though in deep disappointment. When he moved again it was to go in a different direction altogether. Before I went to sleep I came to the conclusion that I had seen a cannibal spider;

one that did not make a web of his own and catch flies, but went about from web to web, surprising and then killing and eating his own kind. That a spider with eyes so large that they looked as though he wore goggles, must have been a cannibal, could not, in my opinion, have been far from the truth.

Up to the time when I had been living in the cottage for about four months, I had not felt the least fear at my lonely surroundings. But one night I began to read a book—it was only a temporary possession — which completely unnerved me, owing to my imagination being so great at that time. This book was by De Quincey, and it contained his essay called " Murder as a Fine Art." It was a quiet night, with no wind. The only sounds came from the moths beating against my lamp-glass, the mosquitoes singing as they flew from place to place, and an occasional tap at the window, which I knew to be made by bats that could just see enough to mistake a lighted window for clear open space. As the

reader can imagine, I had not been more than twenty minutes reading "Murder as a Fine Art" before I began to realize my lonely position. In fact, when I reached a certain part, I became so struck with my lonely surroundings that I was forced to shut the book and cast my eyes towards the window, where I expected to see a face; and strain my ears towards the front door, expecting to hear the latch go click. I had come to the part where the murderer hears a knock at the door, after he has committed murder; and, more bloodthirsty than ever now, is coming down the stairs to open it. The girl, who has been on an errand, is waiting in all innocence outside the door, expecting it to be opened by one of the household. But as I have said, when I came to this part, I had to close the book and try to recover my composure, believing that my own life was in danger, in spite of the silence all around me. Just then I saw, for the first time, something dark sticking out of the plaster in the

chimney-place, just above the grate. Taking my lamp to see what it was, I saw to my horror that it was a tuft of hair. When I saw this I felt certain that a murder had been committed in that lonely cottage, and the body was buried in that part of the wall. Then all at once, as though this discovery was not enough, I heard a sound outside the window, as though someone had crept up to peep in, and then stumbled in the dark. But when I heard this, the sound of present danger, I soon made up my mind what to do. In a few seconds I had reasoned to this effect: "This cottage lies a long way back from the public road, so that no one has a right to be passing close to my door or window. Again, if he is after anything, he will return when I am in bed and perhaps get into the house quietly and take advantage of me in my sleep. So the best thing I can do is to have it out with him at once." With these thoughts I snatched up the poker and hurried to the door, and the next second was standing out-

side. As soon as I looked out, I saw at once the cause of my alarm: it was a tall man, who was then going through the gate, with his back turned towards me. My first thought was to hail him, and ask him who he was, and what he wanted; but when I saw a gun in his hand, I altered my mind and let him go his way.

When I was back in the cottage again, I made sure, before I went to bed, that all the windows were securely fastened, and the two doors, back and front, were locked and bolted. In spite of this I had a sleepless night, for I could not help thinking of my unknown visitor, and also the hair sticking out of the plaster, and every little sound alarmed me. However, towards morning I fell asleep, not being able to keep awake any longer.

The next morning I saw the farmer and, after our usual greeting, said casually: "I noticed last night, for the first time, that there is some hair sticking out of the plaster, just above the grate." "Yes," he answered,

indifferently, "it is horse hair, to bind the plaster together." I was surprised to hear this, for it never once occurred to me but what it was human hair I had seen. However, there could be no mistake about my unknown visitor; so I told the farmer what had happened, but did not mention that I had armed myself with the poker. "Oh," said the farmer, "that was the gamekeeper." "But what right has he in my garden?" I asked. "He has a right to go anywhere on the estate, and is not employed by me," answered the farmer. I said nothing to this, but when, two days afterwards, I met the gamekeeper, I suggested to him how risky it was to go near people's houses at night; and that a man might strike him on the head or shoot him, being too nervous to ask him who he was and his right to be there. On which the gamekeeper explained that he had been as careful as possible, but in passing my window had trodden on a stone and stumbled. Thinking there was a good chance that he

had not been heard, he had gone away without making himself known.

After this one night of fear I regained my usual quiet spirit, but I did not read any more books like De Quincey's "Murder as a Fine Art."

Having now spent a very pleasant spring and summer, I began to look forward to autumn. However, the days were still fine enough to draw me out of the cottage, and I was determined to have no other roof than the sky until the weather forced me to. Although the blackbird, thrush and chaffinch were silent, the lark still took his heavenward journey, singing that long epic of his; and the swallow was still true to the summer, twittering and cutting his fantastic figures in the air. So I was determined to be faithful to the summer as long as the lark and swallow, and to take the open air almost as much as they.

Although I had not been wholly blind to the changes going on, from summer to

autumn, it was not until one morning that I had the truth brought on me in full force. I had gone out, and was leaning on a fence, watching the ducks swimming in a small pool near the cottage. It was now that I was struck by the appearance of a clump of bushes, which bordered the pool on the north side. I was so surprised at what I saw that, in spite of my knowledge that such things could not be possible, I had to go close for inspection, before I could believe the truth. For to my mind it seemed I saw all kinds of fruit: yellow bananas, blue plums, green damsons and red apples; and even heavy clusters of brown nuts were there. Although I knew this could scarcely be, in the natural course, yet, for all that, I had a faint idea that a miracle had been worked. It was this faint idea that made me leave the fence and go close for inspection. And when I did I saw, of course, that they were only the hues of autumn. But how rich they were, showing the great number

of different plants our common hedgerow contains !

Up to the present time I had only fed those birds that had the courage to enter the house, and it was only the robins did this. But when the summer was over, and we were having some hard frost, I began to think of the other birds, knowing they would now find it difficult to get enough to eat. So, every morning I used to crumble up a large slice of bread, which I threw out of the window, being careful to scatter it, so that the birds should not come in close contact to each other and fight. After I had done this for a few mornings the birds began to know what to expect. Some of them would even stand on the sill outside and tap at the window before I was out of bed. Every morning they appeared to be getting more numerous, but I did not mind that. However, after I had been feeding them for about a month, several times a day, I began to get alarmed and worried, for they were waiting

for me in hundreds. In fact a large slice of bread broken into hundreds of crumbs, was nothing to them ; for those crumbs vanished in a second, and the birds were eyeing me for more before I could close the window. Under these conditions my life became a torment, for I could think of nothing else than the hungry birds at my door, waiting to be fed all the time. They were so numerous that every time I opened the door or window, they rose like a big black cloud, taking the daylight from me and making me cold, and frightening me with the sound of their wings beating so close to my face. Of course it was not the value of the bread that worried me, although at that time I was a very poor man. What worried me was that I could not break the bread fast enough to satisfy them, and, my time being taken up in that way, I had no chance to study and write my book. One day I thought to save trouble and time by throwing them a large unbroken slice, believing they would come

forward in respectable twos and threes, and, after picking a crumb or two from it, would retire and give others a chance. But this slice was no sooner on the ground than it turned into one great heap of struggling and fighting birds. So I saw at once that the only way to save myself this cruel sight was to go on breaking the bread into small crumbs, and scattering far and wide. Of course I only had myself to blame for this annoyance ; for had I not encouraged them in the beginning, no doubt they would have found enough to eat in the fields, and around the stable and barn. But having once began to feed them, I could not stop long enough to make them so desperately hungry that they would go elsewhere, and leave me in peace.

One day, when I was in this discontented state of mind, having swarms of birds waiting to be fed, the farmer came to my cottage, and, after our usual first greeting, said : "I have some news for you, which I hope will

not be a great disappointment." He then went on to explain that he had to hire more labour, and for that reason would want the cottage to house the man he hired, who was married and had a family. To explain his own attitude, he hinted that the cottage, being on the farm, was supposed to accommodate the farm labourer, and not to be let to a stranger. For that reason the great landlord himself, who required the whole farm to be kept in good condition until the farmer's lease expired, with sufficient labour—this man could and would have something to say, if he was told that the cottage was used for its present purpose. However, I was not much interested in these outside matters, and told the farmer I would look for another cottage at once, and would make things easy for him by not taking the full length of my notice. As soon as he had left, and I saw the swarms of hungry birds returned, which his coming had driven away, I felt more pleased than disappointed at the news I had heard. For

these hungry birds began to haunt me, and I kept on going to the window to see if they were still there, and of course they were.

On the following day I heard that there was a cottage in the village to be let, and, being recommended by the farmer, I was accepted as a tenant and I prepared to move in at once. But before I left the farmer's cottage I had my own explanations to give, and I hardly knew how to begin them. When I saw him the next time I began in this way: "You will understand that I have an objection to destroying life, and, for that reason, you will not find your cottage very clean when I am gone. Although you will find no filth, such as decayed vegetables, old bones and dirty rags, nor be annoyed by bad smells, yet, for all that, you will find plenty of dry dust and a great number of cobwebs." To my surprise and pleasure the farmer did not appear in the least alarmed at these words. "Tut, tut," he laughed, "that's nothing at all. All it wants is a woman with a broom,

She'll soon put that right." Saying this he, as a married man, looked into my bachelor's face, to see if I had the least notion of what a woman was with a broom in her hand. This farmer had understood me better than I had thought. No doubt he had often opened the back door and gone into the cottage to look around, when I had been wandering about at the extreme ends of the farm, and lying for hours under shady trees.

Although I have now lost that keen observation, which was a continual delight to me, I have still my fullest joy in my love of Nature. I am like the lover who sees his mistress's charms bit by bit, and takes note of this and that, until he marries her and, losing the particulars, loves her as a whole. So, in the same way, I am now married to Nature; and instead of taking a delight in the song of one particular bird, I listen to them all. I no longer watch the trembling of one leaf—I give my love to the whole

tree. I can't say that I enjoy human society, although I like to be thought well of, and to leave a good impression wherever I go. It gives me greater joy to be alone in a meadow than to be surrounded by my own kind, even when I know for certain that I am with true friends who are devoted to me. My worst charge against society is that people talk so much scandal; and I can't help thinking that my turn will come, as the subject of scandal, as soon as my back is turned. The only part of the human family I take any delight in is in children. I find men mostly dull, and women only like big children in many ways, but children with the imagination rubbed out, and that makes all the difference. Of course I am now referring to society people; the people who are not satisfied until they know a well-known man, and then, finding him gentle, quiet and unassuming, lose their first fear of him and assume the superior. The world is full of these people, but why should an author know

them at all? Let every author take a delight in solitude, with his own thoughts, and give none of these people, who know him through his books, the chance to sit in judgment on his personal manners, or he will be sorry for doing so. But up to the present time I have liked all my literary friends, almost without exception, and I believe they like me. For that reason I am always glad to see them, and, when I return to Nature, after paying them a visit, I never regret the time I have been away. If you look for me now, you will find me either with a literary friend, under some green tree or in my own house, where I enjoy every breath I take.

When happy I
  Stand under boughs
Exchanging looks
  With sheep and cows,
And sleep upon
  A tranquil mind,
With no dark doubts
  Of my own kind—

Then why, poor fool,
  Give people power
To halt between
  Sweet looks and sour?
A man that's kind
  And sensitive,
Should with his own
  True fancies live.

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